

Families Taking Charge: Dealing With Unemployment

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When people go through any type of change, the change may trigger a period of grief and feelings of loss. When people become unemployed, they may feel a loss of identity since Americans tend to describe themselves in terms of their job. Any change means grieving for what was and coping with what is to come.

Unemployment may mean changing careers, losing touch with friends at work, or moving to a new area of the state, country, or even another country. Worries about finding a new job, adjusting to a new work place, and managing financially until a new job is found can cause the person to display behavior he or she and the family can't understand. The individual may not be able to look for another job right away and may be very angry. Family members may not understand why the person is acting this way. By applying the stages of grief and loss to recent unemployment, families may better understand what is happening and how to help.

Stages of Grief and Loss

The stages of grief and loss are Shock/Denial, Disorganization, Volatile Emotions, Guilt, Loss and Loneliness, Relief, and Recovery. It is important to understand that these stages are not distinctive. They overlap. A person will drift between them which can be very frustrating, especially when anger and other emotions come back. Events in the unemployed person's new life, such as a bad job interview, may cause the person to go to any of the stages. The person and family need to understand that this is part of dealing with unemployment. They need to understand that this is a normal part of going through the change.

Shock/Denial

- In denial, people refuse to discuss the issue and act as if it isn't happening. Denial may keep the unemployed person from putting plans into place and cause friction between them and family members who don't understand why they are not acting. The individuals feel isolated because they think they have no one who will listen to them and/or is willing to talk to them about what is happening. Family and friends may not know what to say so they avoid saying anything at all. Shock is a defense mechanism that is nature's way of helping us through an unbearable situation.
- Signs of this stage may include feelings of numbness, wanting to escape, avoidance, or asking the unanswerable question "Why?"
- In this stage it helps to have someone assist the person's family and friends to be empathetic listeners so that they show the unemployed person they understand what they're feeling. During this stage people are not ready to act. They don't need solutions; they need to feel that they are heard. The family may need to reassign roles dealing with family finances until the unemployed member is ready to act. The individual can slip back into this stage each time there are new developments.



Disorganization

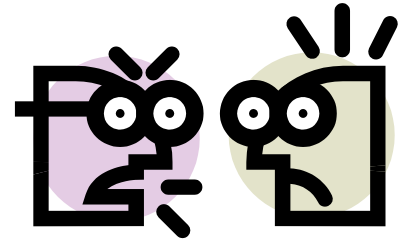
- Disorganization adds the feelings of uncertainty and confusion as the numbness of the first stage wears off. Family and friends may not want to interfere since the unemployed person is physically present. The unemployed person may seem to take forever to assemble materials for a job interview and may avoid taking action until it is too late.
- Signs of this stage are confusion, incoherent communication, and feelings of being out of touch.



- Family and friends need to understand that even though the person is physically present; they are not in a position to act. Having relatives and friends assist with everyday decisions will allow the family to function until the unemployed person is ready to act. This is not the time to make major decisions. An important part of this stage is helping the family find resources in the community to tide them over until the unemployed individual is ready to act. Allowing the unemployed person to give voice to their feelings and emotions without being judged is also important during this stage.

Volatile Emotions

- Volatile emotions are the feelings of anger, bitterness, hurt, resentment, hostility, and frustration that may be aimed at anyone. The unemployed person may voice anger regarding the people involved in the workplace, family members, Supreme Being or the person himself or herself. Allow them to vent, by listening and being supportive. Families need to understand that no matter how hurtful the person is, these feelings are coming from the anger and frustration the person is experiencing, not anything the family member did. Everyone needs to work through their feelings so they can be there for the unemployed individual when that person is ready to move on.



Guilt

- Guilt can occur simultaneously with the volatile emotions. The unemployed individual will analyze the past, and have feelings of regret as well as guilt about past jobs and personal decisions.
- The classic sign of this stage is asking “If only...” or “What if...” Listen and be supportive.
- Help the individual remember that no one is perfect. Past job decisions were made with the best information at the time, not with hindsight. Be careful not to judge or criticize. Thoughts of suicide may appear in this stage. If that happens, the person should not be left alone.

Loss and Loneliness

- Loss and loneliness can be the most painful stage for the unemployed individual. In this stage the person mourns the loss of identity, career, friends at work, and/or friends in the community if a move is required to find employment. Depression may be due to past losses or perceived losses yet to come.
- Signs of this stage are sadness, loneliness, and self-pity.
- The person may not feel like doing anything. They withdraw and attach little purpose to life. Thoughts of suicide can be present in this stage as well. During this stage a person needs good stabilizing friends and family who can be present and encourage her or him to reach out to support groups and professionals for counseling.



Relief

- Relief is when the person starts to see “the light at the end of the tunnel.” They realize the worst is over and that it is time to move on. Sometimes they have the feeling that “enough is enough, I need to move on.” The unemployed person needs help acknowledging his or her feelings. They need to understand that these feelings in no way mean the loss is any less painful, or that they are being disloyal to the memory of the life or friends they are leaving behind. They need to understand that although one path of their life may be

over, there are many opportunities to develop new, exciting paths. All paths offer opportunities to grow and become a better person. Some paths just turn out to be harder than others.



Recovery

- Recovery may be slow or fast depending on the person and the circumstances. In this stage, the unemployed person will start returning phone calls and attending activities. They start planning for the future again. Before this time, they have not been ready to act. Help the person talk openly and problem-solve. This is the time to help the unemployed person evaluate where they go from here. Now they are ready to examine retraining options and actually look for employment.

Strategies for dealing with job loss

1. Keep yourself occupied, active and involved. The loss of a job can leave you with more time than you want to think about your troubles.
2. Use imagined interactions to mentally plan the way you will react in job interviews. The rehearsal can help you perform more effectively and with less stress.
3. You are not to blame for what has happened. Many people are in your situation and, hard as it is, they learn to overcome their difficulties.
4. Remember the children. Teens and younger children need to understand what is happening. Changes in spending patterns and relocation affect them as well as the adults of the family. If they are involved in the planning, it will be easier for them to cope. They may even come up with ideas to reduce spending or create income that you did not consider.
5. Prioritize your bills into those that must be paid, for example mortgage or rent, utilities, car payment, insurance, et cetera, and have consequences such as eviction, foreclosure, utility shut off, etc.
6. Don't take on additional debt. It is tempting to live off credit rather than change your lifestyle. However, the long term effects of this strategy can be devastating.
7. Explain the situation to your creditors. Work out a payment plan you can live with until you get back on your feet. By contacting your creditors before you miss payments they will be more willing to work with you. However, it is important to be realistic. Agreeing to make payments you know are too high will lead to problems and uncooperative creditors in the future.
8. Plan menus and make a list before you shop. Know how much you have to spend.
9. Use coupons when shopping but use them wisely. Don't buy things you would not normally buy and make sure that the name brand after the coupon is cheaper than the store or generic brand.
10. Shop at garage sales and consignment shops for purchases that cannot be put off until money is not so tight.
11. Have a garage sale to get rid of all that stuff you don't need. Make it a family project. Besides creating income it will reduce clutter.

Adapted from:

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